

Australian Broadcasting Corporation axes 120 jobs, decimating news, arts and other vital services

Richard Phillips
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In another major assault on jobs and conditions, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) management announced last month that it was axing 120 jobs as part of a five-year restructure of the network. The measures are in line with decades of cuts by consecutive Liberal-National Coalition and Labor federal governments that have drastically slashed budgets to the state-funded broadcaster.

In 1986, the ABC employed over 6,000 people. Today it has less than 4,000 workers, many of them on low paid, short-term contracts. In the past decade alone, network management, working in collaboration with the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have eliminated about 1,600 jobs.

Foreign news bureaus have been closed or drastically reduced, short wave radio services to the Northern Territory stopped and Classic FM live concerts curtailed. There have been severe cuts to Australian drama and children's programming and substantial areas of production have been contracted out to private companies.

In 2020, ABC management axed 250 jobs across a range of departments and dismantled the network's sound and reference libraries. Two years later, in 2022, it axed 75 archivist's jobs—58 permanent and 17 contract positions—or 30 percent of the network's archival workforce.

Whilst in opposition Labor pledged to fully restore \$783 million in funding cuts imposed between 2013 and 2022 by previous Liberal-National Coalition governments. The Albanese Labor government's May budget allocation of \$1.1 billion per year for the next five years, however, does not keep pace with rising

costs, let alone make up for the cuts imposed by previous Coalition governments.

Managing Director David Anderson claimed last month's job destruction was needed to transform the corporation into a digital-first media organisation. The network's principal focus, he said, would be on streaming platforms, such as ABC iView, ABC Listen and ABC News programs, instead of live radio and television channel broadcasting.

ABC's national political editor Andrew Probyn was among the first to be told that his job had been axed. His is one of 42 positions to be wiped out in the news division, including journalists, editors and camera and sound operators from ABC-TV's high-rating "7.30," "Australian Story" and "Four Corners" shows.

Eight state-based 7 p.m. Sunday television news bulletins will also be shut down and replaced with a single national program and supplementary online bulletins. The network's separate regional and local divisions will close, with employees not made redundant transferred into the "News" or the newly established "Content" divisions.

The network's standalone arts division is to be gutted with the positions of two of its most senior arts journalists—Arts Digital editor Dee Jefferson and Managing Arts editor Edwina Throsby—eliminated. All arts material, as well as everything else not designated as "News" will be under the control of the "Content" division, headed by Chris Oliver-Taylor, a recently hired Netflix senior executive.

No details have been provided about what will happen to material for the performing arts, literature, film and other visual arts, which were previously commissioned and produced by specialised journalists

from the arts unit.

Most likely, arts stories in the future could be produced by journalists drawn from a general reporting pool on an ad hoc basis. It is not yet clear what will happen to specialised science, music, history and education programs.

Every component of the decades-long job destruction at the ABC has been imposed by the MEAA and the CPSU. Apart from a token stoppage by CPSU members on March 22, the unions have not organised a single day of industrial action at the broadcaster in the past seventeen years.

Opposed to any mobilisation of ABC workers to fight these attacks, the modus operandi of the unions is to feign shock over management announcements—cuts that they already knew were coming—and then issue toothless calls and petitions for increased government funding.

Like all previous job cut announcements, the unions did not organise mass meetings of their members, let alone combined MEAA and CPSU meetings, to discuss how to fight last month's "restructuring" assault. They called instead for meetings with management to appeal for voluntary redundancies and consultations about how best to apply the cuts.

The last enterprise agreement foisted on ABC workers in May this year, in fact, prepared the grounds for the latest assault.

In 2022, workers demanded annual pay increases in line with inflation, then running at 7.8 percent, improvements in working conditions and hours, and better career paths for younger journalists.

Workers overwhelmingly rejected a contemptuous 3 percent wage offer from management and were prepared to take industrial action on several occasions, only to have the unions call it off at the last minute.

The MEAA lodged a claim for an annual 6 percent rise, publicly admitting that constituted a real wage cut, but then settled on an overall rise of 11 percent over three years—a below inflation increase—and a \$1,500 sign on bonus.

The agreement, which the unions hailed as a victory, includes onerous "annual performance assessments" of long-term employees or those on extended project contracts. It prevents workers from taking industrial

action over any issue until the agreement expires in 2025.

Nor has the assault on media workers been confined to the state-funded ABC. Thousands of jobs have been axed in the commercial media sector over the past decade with the closure of regional and rural newspapers, along with downsizing by radio and television broadcasters and book publishers, to name just a few of the workers covered by the more than 15,000-member MEAA.

Likewise, the MEAA played the key role in collaborating with music, drama and dance company managers to impose severe wage cuts and pay freezes during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, boasting that its deals had set a precedent in the entertainment and arts sector.

These experiences make clear that ABC workers cannot defend their jobs and working conditions if they remain tied to the media unions which function as an industrial police force for management.

ABC workers need to form their own democratically controlled rank-and-file organisations determined to fight the latest and all future job destruction. A struggle must be taken up for the reinstatement of all sacked employees and a reduction of working hours with no loss of pay. Appeals must be made to other media and entertainment workers confronting the same attacks, imposed by the same union bureaucracies, to join this struggle.

What is required are new fighting organisations and a political perspective based on an agreement that workers' jobs and conditions take precedence over government budgetary dictates and corporate profits.



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